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SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION TRIP TO SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI

REF: 2007 TBILISI 3148

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Poloff visited the towns of Borjomi, Akhaltsikhe, Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti May 1-2 to gauge the pre-election mood of the political parties, NGOs, press, local government officials and general populace in the lead-up to the May 21 Parliamentary elections. Samtskhe-Javakheti was one of two minority regions (the other was Kvemo-Kartli) during the Presidential election which recorded suspiciously high voter turnout and high vote count for the United National Movement (UNM). In the spa town of Borjomi (not considered a minority region), there were campaign headquarters for several political parties, in contrast to Akhalkalaki (an ethnic Armenian region), where only the UNM was present. In all of the cities visited, the UNM was the only active force, and other parties, even if they had a presence, had yet to get into the full swing of campaigning. Residents from the region pointed to the fact that opposition candidates were rarely seen or heard, and most locals were not familiar with them as a result. Preliminary indications are that most voters will vote for UNM, saying that they were tired of the Joint Opposition (the United National Council of Opposition-UNC) running negative campaigns without concrete platforms. According to them, what the country needs now is stability and UNM can provide it. End Comment.

UNM--Deeds not Words

¶2. (SBU) The UNM representative in Akhalkalaki, Hamlet Movsesyan, repeated many of the same UNM accomplishments to Poloff that he mentioned in December (reftel). He cited the biggest problem in the area as unemployment and is hoping that between the Kars-Akhalkalaki railroad project, the two Millennium Challenge road projects (Akhalkalaki to Tbilisi and Ninotsminda to Tsalka), and possible easing of visa restrictions with Russia that this problem will soon too be addressed. Movsesyan underscored that only UNM has Armenian candidates running for Parliamentary seats--two on the majoritarian list and Movsesyan himself on the party list. He went on to say that the other candidates are two Georgians who live in Tbilisi and had yet to make their presence known in the region. Movsesyan said that locals would not vote for someone whom they do not know and who have no long-term ties to the region. He reiterated the UNM slogan that locals want to see results (deeds) and not just talk (words)--and with UNM they have. (Comment: Poloff met with Labor and Industrialist Party representatives in Akhalkalaki. Although neither have campaign headquarters there, they offered the use of a room in a nearby building, but when Poloff went there, the door was locked and the person with the key could not be located. End Comment.)

Gamgebelis--Can You Say "Squeaky Clean"?

¶3. (SBU) Poloff met with Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda

Gamgebelis to reemphasize the need for transparent elections, underlining that local officials should not interfere in the process and that police presence needs to be confined to the outside of the precinct according to the electoral law.

(Comment: Gamgebelis are city managers hired by the local Sakrebulo. The Sakrebulo is a council elected by the local populace to run local government.) Both Gamgebelis acknowledged that the stakes are high for this election and that the international community will be watching the process closely. Akhalakali's newly appointed Gamgebeli, Nair Samsonidze was quick to boast that the turnout will be even higher for UNM this election than for the Presidential election. (Comment: Samsonidze was to be officially appointed on May 2. He was previously the Deputy Gamgebeli, but was considered for the post of Gamgebeli when Arutian Oganessian vacated the position several weeks ago to run for Parliament. Voter turn out in Akhalkalaki DEC 40 during Presidential Elections was some 81.1 percent, and of this, 89.8 percent voted for UNM. End Comment.) Both officials were adept at quoting statistics to show how the UNM has benefited the region, Samsonidze citing the nearly five fold increase in the region's budget since the UNM came to power.

UNC Candidate--Me and My Shadow  
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14. (SBU) UNC candidate from Akhaltsikhe Valiko Baliashvili was the only opposition candidate with whom Poloff met that could explain in detail his platform and plans for the region should he be elected. Baliashvili, who is an experienced politician, was active in communist times, in office during Shevardnadze's rule, and four years ago helped campaign for Saakashvili. Baliashvili's plan centers around creating

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conditions for small and medium businesses, investigating questionable practices associated with the installation of communal electricity meters, lobbying for the benefits promised to the mountainous regions in earlier regimes (such as salary increases, earlier retirement ages, discounts on fuel, free education), and decentralizing the budgeting process so that local governments receive a percentage of the total budget and are independent in planning their expenditures. Baliashvili told Poloff that he is being pressured by the government for his political participation. He went on to say that due to his activism, his wife was fired from her job as principal of the local school, and his son was arrested on false drug charges. Baliashvili said that his son, who is currently serving a prison sentence, was denied a Presidential pardon because Baliashvili refused to quit his campaign for public office. Baliashvili said that police in civilian attire are following him along the campaign trail, and when he leaves his constituents' homes, police then question citizens about what was discussed. (Comment: Poloff also heard these allegations of pressure from the Labor Party representative in Akhalkalaki, however the Industrialists party representative in Akhalkalaki said that they were not experiencing these difficulties. End Comment.)

Borjomi--Calm Waters  
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15. (SBU) NGO representatives in the spa town of Borjomi told Poloff that the pre-election atmosphere is considerably calmer now in comparison to the Presidential pre-election period when it was incredibly tense. So far, they have heard no major complaints, but said "it is too soon to tell yet." According to a local NGO who works with media, only Giorgi Targamadze's party the Christian Democrats has filed for its free television air time. (Comment: During the Presidential election, access to media was a chief criticism of the UNC. End Comment.) She suspected that the UNC would wait until the last days/hours of the campaign to make their request. Several opined that the popularity of the UNC is waning due to its negative campaign and Georgians are growing weary.

(Comment: Recent public opinion surveys which show UNC's support dropping from the twenty percentile to the teens indicate that this is true. End Comment.) One representative said that opposition candidates can no longer show up the last two weeks of a campaign and sway public opinion with their rhetoric. Georgian voters have become more sophisticated and want to hear about platforms and programs to promote stability, not negative rhetoric. The same representative said that even if the UNC plans protests the election results, that the turnout will be small and momentum will soon fizzle.

16. (SBU) Comment: It is interesting that two opposition candidates, Temur Baramidze (Labor) and Otar Iagorashvili (Republican) who are Georgian and reside in Tbilisi would be on the ticket to run in Samtskhe-Javakheti, a region which is notably 90 percent Armenian. It is hard to understand why Georgians who don't have a permanent presence in the region expect to win and why they would expend effort even to do so unless perhaps it is part of a larger UNC strategy to cry foul when the UNM wins again a large percentage in the region during the May 21 elections as it did in January. Above all, Samtskhe-Javakhetians are realists, which is aptly demonstrated by Nair Samsonidze's not so subtle shift since Poloff last visited the region. Samsonidze was previously the mayor of Akhalkalaki. He was never officially a member of an opposition party, but his rhetoric aligned him with opposition and nationalist sentiments. Samsonidze now lauds the deeds of UNM and is working hard to have a good showing during the elections. His boast of achieving a 92 percent turnout is an indicator that he takes his role of Gamgebeli seriously and links his future success and that of the region with high percentages on election day. Unlike the previous visit, Poloff this time heard no negative comments about the closing of the Russian base in Akhalkalaki and the serious consequences this has had for employment in the region. End Comment.

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